


RESTRICTED

P.0794

MR SCHOLAR

RAIL STRIKE: CCU MEETING TODAY

Following the Civil Contingencies Unit meeting at 12.15 today, the Home Secretary thought that the Prime Minister would wish to be aware of the following, as background for Prime Minister's Questions this afternoon.

2. Now that strike action on both BR and LT Underground trains has been suspended from midnight tonight, emergency arrangements for traffic flow and parking (ie suspension of parking meters and waiting restrictions in side streets) will be retained for one more day tomorrow, but, assuming that public transport is restored tomorrow, will be lifted with effect from Thursday morning. This will be announced this afternoon.

3. The Prime Minister may also be interested to know the following:

i. Operation PUFFER (laying of tracking in Hyde Park and Regents Park by servicemen to provide additional parking spaces) has been completed and the extra spaces would have been available from tomorrow. The spaces will not now be used but the tracking will be kept in place for the time being.

ii. The CCU considered that the emergency arrangements for traffic flow and parking had in general worked well but there were special difficulties in the City and the eastern approaches to the City. Urgent work is therefore in hand to identify additional temporary offstreet parking areas in east London.


P L GREGSON

29 June 1982

RESTRICTED

CONFIDENTIAL

Copy 15 N. Venech
J. Schmitt
Bif

MEETING OF PRESENTATION GROUP ON RAIL DISPUTE ISSUES

10 AM TUESDAY 29 JUNE 1982

Present:

B Mower - No 10
M Devereau - Department of Transport
H Colver - No 10.

Department of Transport reported on the latest situation following the NUR decision to call off the strike action from midnight, 29 June, and take the issues to Lord McCarthy's industrial tribunal.

Mr Howell was said to regard the situation as "very ominous" with Mr Weighell back in a good position. It was important not to lose sight of the basic issues and the BR/Government position should not be allowed to "slide away". The NUR had not delivered on the agreed productivity deal, Mr Weighell kept challenging BR to operate what he called 'his' scheme whereas BR felt the NUR had not delivered on BR's scheme which the NUR had agreed. Department of Transport would put BR under pressure to press the NUR on productivity. The NUR had now said they wanted to refer the issues to the national tribunal - and this referral would cover pay as well as productivity. BR's position was that they could not stop the NUR taking this course but it was a unilateral reference by NUR (if BR joined NUR in referral to McCarthy, the result would be binding). BR would nevertheless welcome the opportunity to air the issues again with the proviso that past productivity deals as well as future ones should be looked at and that, whatever McCarthy says, there is no more money available.

It was important that NUR members would be back at work - it would be that much more difficult for the leadership to get them out on strike again in the near future. However, a complicating factor was that on Wednesday BR would post the new rosters which would come into effect next Monday. This would raise the old dispute with ASLEF and BR had said that any drivers refusing to operate the new rosters would be sent home. BR would try to operate the railway on this sort of basis for the first week but the possibility of sending NUR men home after that had to be considered. ASLEF had met the previous day to consider their position and had, once again, floated the idea of an experiment involving half the network on the new rosters and half on the old system. The presence of ideas like this indicated that BR might be able to find an interim solution.

BR's basic position, therefore, was that nothing had been changed by NUR's latest move, they would welcome the opportunity to restate the position, there must be talks, there would be no pay deal without a productivity deal and the rosters issue was still central.

The Government's stance should be a cautious welcome, bearing

CONFIDENTIAL

in mind that the issues remained to be resolved - particularly on productivity. There were also other issues affecting other unions. So nobody should kid themselves that we are out of the wood.

It was noted that Mr Weighell was making much of his allegations that there had been a failure to invest in the railways. It was agreed that a leaflet should be produced setting out the facts. It could be pointed out that BR had been unable to make all the investment it would have liked to make because of reduced income - the ASLEF dispute alone cost £90m.

Another "red herring" was the allegation that East Anglia electrification was being held up because of the dispute. This was not so. This electrification programme was under normal consideration and we should refute any idea of it being used as a political lever.

Operation Puffer would stay in place for the moment.

There would be no further statements in the House that day, though the Prime Minister would no doubt have an opportunity to put the Government's view during Prime Minister's Questions.

On the separate, but related, London Transport dispute, NUR intentions were not obvious. Having backed down on the pay issue they seemed to feel that they should major on the cuts issue again. This was strange since LT had withdrawn the contentious plan. There would be a meeting that evening at 6 pm in Plymouth between Mr Ridley of London Transport, Mr Weighell of the NUR and ACAS on this dispute and it was thought a solution was in sight.

Mr Howell had postponed a scheduled meeting with Mr Livingstone, originally planned for that day. Mr Howell would be interviewed on the Brian Hayes Show on LBC, basically to thank Londoners for their sterling efforts.

Next Meeting

To be arranged.

HUGH COLVER
29 June 1982

Transport

CLIVE

1815 hours

Michael Scholar has just rung with this message:

Letter from Buckton to Rose of Railways Board has just been delivered (about 20 minutes ago) to say that ASLEF reject the Board's proposals on flexible rostering: they are not prepared to experiment with the future of their members. There will be an all-out strike starting on Sunday night.

Debbie Green

29/6/82

L

SITREP ON BRITISH RAIL/LONDON TRANSPORT STRIKE AS AT 1630 HOURS

40 per cent of NUR members reported for work at Southern Region. 30 per cent reported on Eastern and London and Midland Regions. But less than 5 per cent of scheduled services ran because of picketing and in particular because of absence of key members (signalmen etc.). Many ASLEF men reported for work and some drove trains. BR withdrew its pay offer as it had promised to do.

In the NUR Conference at Plymouth the vote on the strike has been postponed until tomorrow. There has been no public disclosure of exchanges between Mr. Pat Lowry of ACAS and Sid Weighell but privately it is understood that Mr. Lowry offered to Mr. Weighell that ACAS would undertake an inquiry on all aspects of the dispute and Mr. Weighell replied that he had got a rather better idea which he wanted to follow -- but we don't have details (off the record intelligence).

PA tapes report that Mr. Weighell is disappointed that some NUR members crossed picket lines.

London Transport

There has been a service of some kind - very infrequent - on the Victoria, Bakerloo, District and City lines. That is to say that we have a better service than we had last week - but still very minimal. The LT defence committee has asked for an all-out strike by the buses on July 5 in protest against reduction in services arising both from the fares fair policy and from the long-term trend of falling demand for LT. They have called for this, notwithstanding the Executive's offer of a four week cooling off period. The feeling is that the TGWU will probably heed the call of the London Transport Defence Committee but it is unclear as to whether the members themselves will listen to their union. The London Transport Executive itself is meeting tonight to consider what its next move should be.

Traffic

For the first time since 1926 traffic in London beat all records. Twelve-mile hold-ups in some places, particularly in the East and South East of London were reported. People were taking up to

4½ hours to get to work. Assessment in London is that today's traffic is probably the worst day because, just as in the ASLEF dispute, on the first day everybody sets off more or less at the same time and it takes a few days for people to learn to spread the load and improve methods of getting to work - more parking spaces available in Central London as days go by.

CCU is meeting again tomorrow to consider what, if any, further steps should be taken.

Parliament

Mr. Howell made his statement. It went quite well. Mr. Albert Booth called for tripartite talks between government, unions and management, and Mr. Howell answered this by saying that any calls to end the strike should be addressed to the NUR Executive in Plymouth. It was they who called the strike. Willie Rickett heard the statement and his judgement is that the Opposition were nervous about coming out too strongly. Government backbenchers felt very confident about the ground on which the Government and the two Boards are standing.

28 June 1982

British Rail and London Transport (Disputes)

4.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Howell): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about industrial action on British Rail and London Transport.

As the House knows, the National Union of Railwaymen is now on strike both on British Rail and the London Transport Underground. Nine London bus garages have also joined in.

The NUR strikes have not been total. Limited services have been running in a number of areas including some into London, but without rail or Underground services the major routes into London have been heavily overloaded with substantial delays, particularly in East and South-East London. Hundreds of thousands of people suffered enormous inconvenience this morning. I congratulate all of them on the initiative and effort that they have shown in getting to work. The help being given by the police, the motoring organisations and the radio stations is also appreciated.

The Government's view is that the strikes constitute a wholly pointless and unwarranted assault on the travelling public. They should be called off without further delay before irretrievable damage is done, not least to the railway system. I understand that the general secretary of the NUR has called ACAS in to help, at 12 hours' notice. But plainly the first requirement is that the NUR and ASLEF should deliver on the productivity arrangements for which they have already been paid and which emerged from the intervention of ACAS last summer. All who want to see a modern and efficient railway should support the British Railways Board in getting these promises on productivity delivered.

On London Transport, the pretext for the strike was flimsy in the extreme. London Transport had already called a cooling-off period for further discussions on its proposals for timetable changes. Negotiations on pay were still in their early stages. There are no grounds whatsoever for throwing over the normal negotiating procedures as the NUR has done.

In full co-operation with the Metropolitan Police steps have already been taken to help ease the traffic situation in London. In addition to 8,000 extra car parking spaces being provided in Central London, arrangements by the Ministry of Defence are now in hand to provide a further 3,500 places in Hyde Park and Regents Park. Parking restrictions and parking meters have been suspended in all side streets. Special efforts are being made to keep the radial routes free of obstruction. Road works are being suspended wherever possible within 60 miles of Central London. Businesses will be asked to minimise heavy goods movements during the rush hours.

In addition, it is essential that people stagger their working hours and, above all, ensure that cars are full and that journeys are shared. We stand ready to introduce all necessary further measures to help the flow of traffic and to ensure that Britain keeps moving. I will keep the House fully informed.

Mr. Booth (Barrow-in-Furness): Does the Secretary of State accept that his primary responsibility is to take those actions which are open to him to keep all transport

services, including the railways, running? In view of that, has he approached either the British Railways Board or the National Union of Railwaymen, or both, with a view to finding an acceptable basis for the settlement of the dispute? Were his provocative and intemperate broadcasts during the weekend calculated to worsen the atmosphere in the dispute, thus making it harder to settle?

Was the Secretary of State's reference to Sidney Weighell, the general secretary of the NUR, asking for the help of ACAS at 12 hours' notice intended to represent fairly the general secretary's actions last week to try to obtain useful results from the ACAS initiative?

The Opposition strongly regret the inconvenience to the travelling public and the damage that the dispute will do to British industry. Nevertheless, the 5 per cent. offer, five months after the due settlement date, can be regarded as hardly adequate, even without the existence of the strings that are attached to it.

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the Government's record of running down investment in British Rail has undermined the confidence of the railway work force about the future of their industry? Moreover, does he accept that it has wrecked the understanding that existed between the unions and the board about productivity and investment being linked? Will he acknowledge the repeated warnings that he has been given from this Dispatch Box that the consequences of the Government reneging on their responsibilities to the railways would culminate in the present strike?

Mr. Howell: I note and welcome the right hon. Gentleman's regret about the terrible inconvenience that has been caused to hundreds of thousands of people, many families and many people who are unable to protect themselves. However, the necessary intervention should be with some of the hot heads in the NUR executive. Mr. Sidney Weighell himself called them "a squawking Left-wing rabble". It is to them that advice should be addressed to prevent the union executive from leading the industry and the thousands of workers in it over the cliff edge. The right hon. Gentleman has a part to play in such intervention.

Pay Increases are a matter for the British Railways Board. The right hon. Gentleman will not have forgotten that British Rail employees enjoyed a 20 per cent. wage increase two years ago and an 11 per cent. increase last year. That compounds up to a 33½ per cent. wage increase in the past two years. Many other people would have been grateful for such an increase. It is a considerable increase. The 11 per cent. last year was 8 per cent. pay plus 3 per cent. in return for promises to increase productivity. The NUR agreed to the flexible rosters and in recognition of that was given yet a further pay increase. It is only reasonable that the British Railways Board should seek to get the promises made last year delivered before settling this year's pay arrangements.

Investment and productivity go hand in hand. Ten major projects have been completed or approved and eight more are in the pipeline. If such projects are to go ahead and there is to be more investment in British Rail, they must go hand in hand with modern work practices, as similar schemes have done in every Continental railway system. Let the right hon. Gentleman give that message to the unions. We should then see working properly the new equipment that has already been built and on which

...payers' money has been spent which would give us confidence that we have a railway system for the future that will be worked in a modern way.

Mr. Terence Higgins (Worthing): Is not the Opposition's position extraordinary, when the London Transport strike reflects a total abrogation of accepted procedures by the NUR? Why have not the Opposition condemned this situation, which makes further negotiation meaningless? Will my right hon. Friend explain why we now have a strike on London Transport buses for which there is equally no justification?

Mr. Howell: My right hon. Friend is entirely correct. I listened to the right hon. Member for Barrow-in-Furness (Mr. Booth) for words of condemnation of a strike that has been called over pay and without due notice. Pay discussions were continuing and no final offer had been made or discussed. I suspect that the strike has little to do with industrial relations and everything to do with an opportunity to try to strangle London.

It appears that the strike on the buses is in sympathy with the other strikes. There seems to be a general desire to inflict the maximum inconvenience on Londoners and London Transport users. I look—some hon. Members may say in vain—to the responsible public authority, the GLC to put the London Transport scene in order again, which is within its power.

Mr. Harry Cowans (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): How will the Minister's statement help to end the dispute? Is he aware that he has made provocative statements about a union executive that has already given up thousands of jobs with little return? Would it not make more sense if he refrained from saying the sort of things that he has said on the radio and in the House and freely admitted that he bears some responsibility because of the promised investment which has not been forthcoming? Would it not make sense and be mannerly if he called the parties together, pledged the investment and sought a settlement?

Mr. Howell: The hon. Gentleman carries influence and is dedicated to the interests of the railways and the NUR. I repeat the words of Sidney Weighell, the general secretary, who called the immoderate elements who have pushed the union down dangerous paths "a squawking Left-wing rabble". The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues and friends in the NUR and in the Labour Party have as much a duty as the rest of us to support the moderate elements and to ensure that the "rabble" is not allowed to lead tens of thousands of dedicated railwaymen over the cliff edge and do permanent damage to the railway industry, which none of us wants to happen.

Mr. Robert Adley (Christchurch and Lymington): Will my right hon. Friend accept that I am one of the keenest supporters of railway modernisation and find it hard to regard the NUR's action as anything other than utterly obstructionist, when the taxpayer and the Government have put in £150 million to provide a new electric service on the Bedford to St. Pancras line and the equipment is just lying about because the union will not operate the system, even though it was agreed when the trains were being designed? Will my right hon. Friend bring it home to Mr. Weighell and many other union members that it is ironic that those who support the Labour Party are helping to destroy part of the public sector and

it is the private sector that is doing everything that it can to alleviate the difficulties and to keep the country on the move at work?

Mr. Howell: The failure to agree sensible manning levels on the new electric trains for Bedford is just one example of where investment has been made but the productivity agreement has not matched it. The key to investment is better performance by British Rail. That will encourage resources for the further investment that I should like to see and ensure that the industry is modernised. But hand in hand with that we need work practices of 1982 and not of 1919.

Mr. Walter Johnson (Derby, South): Is it not time to refer the unions' pay claim to the Railway Staff National Tribunal, which is the industry's arbitration body? Should not the Minister have by now advised the unions to take the claim to that body? May I appeal to the Minister to intervene in the dispute, as Governments have intervened time and again over the years? Is he not anxious about the hundreds of thousands of commuters who are suffering sheer hell? Is he aware that hundreds of thousands of railwaymen want nothing to do with the dispute and that it is right for him to intervene to try to end it?

Mr. Howell: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great experience. I am sure that he is right. Many members of the railway unions want nothing to do with the dispute. I believe that between 30 per cent. and 40 per cent. in some areas have today reported for work. They realise the dangerous course on which the union executive is leading them. The referral of the pay claim to the Railway Staff National Tribunal is for the parties to the claim. As the British Railways Board warned, however, at the moment, there is no pay offer. It said that the existing pay offer of 5 per cent. from September would be withdrawn if there was industrial strife. It has been withdrawn.

Mr. Ronald W. Brown (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): Does not the Minister have a crucial role to play? He states that he is ready to introduce all necessary measures to help the flow of traffic and ensure that Britain keeps moving. Instead of continuing to make provocative statements—I certainly do not dissent from his view about London Transport—should he not try to bring the three parties—British Rail management, the unions and the Government on behalf of the public—together to seek a solution for this extraordinarily damaging crisis?

Mr. Howell: It is difficult to see why it should be considered provocative for the public to wish to protect itself and for the Government to take all necessary measures to minimise the hardship against the declared strikes which I do not believe the hon. Gentleman would argue are soundly based industrial disputes. Because of the London Transport strikes many children are not getting to school, people cannot visit their relatives, holidays are smashed and other hopes are ruined, all for a purpose that the public find hard to fathom. I should like to hear the right hon. Member for Barrow-in-Furness (Mr. Booth) and other leaders of his party challenge the union on why it has inflicted misery on tens of thousand of people. That is a reasonable and not a provocative question.

Sir David Price (Eastleigh): Will my right hon. Friend impress on the NUR leaders that the future welfare of its members depends on the good will of the travelling public? As he represents the many frustrated members of

[Sir David Price]

the public who are "yomping" their way round London in the rain, will he explain to Mr. Weighell that he has little reciprocal good will from us at present?

Mr. Howell: I shall do that. I believe that Mr. Weighell understands that, but some members of his executive do not. The longer they remain in ignorance, the more danger there is to the industry's future.

Mr. Les Huckfield (Nuneaton): Will the Secretary of State accept that since he and his right hon. Friends fixed both the external finance limit and the public service obligation grant to British Rail, which have been reduced in real terms, he cannot escape his responsibility? His only contribution so far in this dispute has been to stand on the sidelines calling others names. Does he not accept that the action he has taken and his remarks have only served to make matters far worse?

Mr. Howell: The difficulty is that the hon. Gentleman, who intervenes often in railway issues, purveys incorrect facts to many people who listen to his views about the railways.

Mr. Michael Cocks (Bristol, South): How can facts be incorrect?

Mr. Howell: The hon. Gentleman's facts are incorrect. It is amazing, but his facts about the social grant are incorrect. Last year, I authorised an increase of £110 million over the previous year in the social grant and maintained it at nearly the same level this year. The social grant is running at £100 million, in real terms, above the levels for 1980. That is substantial. The EFL is high, and the expenditure on track maintenance and renewal per mile is higher than in 1977 and 1978. If the hon. Gentleman were to put over some of those facts, he might find an industry that is more ready to recognise the benefits that would be available if everyone were to co-operate and work with modern practices.

Mr. John Hunt (Ravensbourne): My right hon. Friend has rightly commended the efforts of commuters who have made their way to work today. Will he extend his congratulations to those railwaymen who have reported for duty and shown more regard for the interests and burdens of the travelling public than for the political motives of their union leaders. Is not their action in the best tradition of railwaymen—a tradition which is being undermined by Mr. Weighell and Mr. Buckton?

Mr. Howell: The efforts of those who have reported for work and believe that it is wrong for the railways to close reflect their sense of duty and public service and a proper appreciation that if the union executive prolongs the strike it will be a disaster for the railway system and the most severe threat for many years to jobs and investment in the railway industry. That is appreciated by many sensible and dedicated railwaymen. I wish that they would pass it on to others.

Mr. Douglas Jay (Battersea, North): Is the Minister aware that if the Government had the sense and moderation to legislate on London Transport last winter the whole of the present trouble with LT could have been avoided?

Mr. Howell: If we had had the immoderation to follow the right hon. Gentleman's views and had allowed the

GLC to increase expenditure on London Transport by £1,200 million over the next four years rates would have been so high that there would have been no business in Central London to come to. In that sense the right hon. Gentleman may have been right. His recipe was a most immoderate and unwise one. It is far more sensible for the GLC to concentrate, as I have asked it to do, on making sensible use of the substantial subsidy now available. It is perfectly possible for the law to be changed, if necessary, for next year. The GLC can put its plans to us and there is no need for disruption or inflaming support for the strikes arising from the Law Lords judgment or the legal position.

Mr. David Alton (Liverpool, Edge Hill): Does the Secretary of State accept that it is the earnest hope of all members of the travelling public that the dispute will be settled rapidly, and that immoderate language by either side will not be helpful? Will he dissociate himself from the comments made by the Paymaster General over the weekend in which he suggested that British railwaymen are on a par with Argentine conscripts? By questioning their patriotism he was doing no service at all.

Mr. Howell: My right hon. Friend did no such thing. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, in the interests of his constituents and many other people struggling to work, will give them his full support in facing the inconvenience and misery that have been placed upon them and reassure them that he is using his influence to stop those in the union executive who are following this course from imposing further inconvenience and misery for no good reason on his constituents and many others in the city which he represents.

Mr. Anthony Nelson (Chichester): Is my right hon. Friend aware that he enjoys widespread support for his reluctance to become directly involved in the dispute? Is not the irony of the present position that the actions of the railways unions, far from bringing any concessions on productivity and rostering, are only likely to hasten the day when more jobs will be lost and greater productivity agreements will be required to finance the catastrophic losses that the industrial action will cause?

Mr. Howell: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The course upon which the union is now set will be utterly counterproductive.

Mr. Stanley Cohen (Leeds, South-East): Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that we have now reached the point when all the parties involved in the dispute should be called together? The Government have failed to face up to their responsibilities to the industry and the nation, and it has been left to people like myself who spent the whole of last week meeting the TUC and ACAS to do the job that the Government should be doing.

I hope that the Government will face up to that responsibility. If they want increased productivity, they have to increase investment. In spite of what the right hon. Gentleman may have said on the radio this morning, investment in British Rail compared to the rest of Europe is appalling.

The final point I wish to make—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am anxious to call four more hon. Members from each side of the House.

Mr. Howell: It is desirable that the British Railways Board and the Union, which has called the strike, should discuss the basis on which the strike can be called off. Last

week the British Railways Board proposed new and easier arrangements by which productivity changes could be introduced. They were put forward in an appropriate spirit but they were turned down. How can the hon. Gentleman argue that there is a need for the parties to come together when it is clear that the attempt to do that last week was unsuccessful? The prevailing spirit of the executive of the NUR—I hope it will change—is that it is not interested in moving to where productivity promises will be delivered, whether on a basis satisfactory to it or on any other basis. That is what needs to be changed before a coming together will do any good.

Sir John Biggs-Davison (Epping Forest): The well-intentioned words of some Labour Members who have experience of the railways contrast with what was said by the right hon. Member for Barrow-in-Furness (Mr. Booth), who described the fulfilment of past pledges on productivity by the unions as strings to be attached to the ending of the disruption.

Mr. Howell: My hon. Friend is entirely right. There are several nuances and differences of approach which reflect differences of approach within the union. Unfortunately, the less clear thinking and more immoderate approach seem to be prevailing.

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): Does the Minister accept that, as there is massive inconvenience, dislocation and damage to British Industry because of the strike, that shows that railway men ought to be better paid? Public transport has been subsidised by inadequate wages for too long. Is the Minister aware that thousands of public transport workers depend on family income supplement despite the unsocial hours that they work? Will he act like a Minister responsible for the service instead of as a propagandist for a Cabinet that believes in taking on the public sector?

Mr. Howell: The hon. Gentleman talks about pay. I mentioned earlier the substantial increases that railwaymen have had in recent years and the extra increases they were paid for promises on productivity. The work changes have not taken place. There might have been room for more had £80 million not gone down the plughole during the earlier part of the year when ASLEF decided to resist changes towards flexible rostering which were recognised as being right by the British Railways Board and have since been confirmed by Lord McCarthy and the Railway Staff National Tribunal. If there had been a little more pressure on ASLEF from the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends not to pour money away, the railway system might be in better shape now. It is a little late to think about it now.

Mr. Tony Durant (Reading, North): Will my right hon. Friend ask the Opposition whether they condemn the strike?

Mr. Howell: The question hangs in the air. No doubt the right hon. Member for Barrow-in-Furness (Mr. Booth) will speak for himself. I know that the nation at large will want to know where those in the political parties stand on strikes and strike action which, certainly in the case of London, have a very thin and flimsy industrial base. We will want to know that from the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Donald Dewar (Glasgow, Garscadden): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that one of the reasons for the present situation is a genuine fear about job security and

future investment in the industry? Even if he will not come into the arena on the pay side and on the very inadequate offer that has been made, surely he can give an assurance that the Government will have a much more genuine financial commitment to the future of the railways than they have shown in the past. If he is genuinely worried about what he sees as immoderation in the NUR, will he accept that one of the greatest difficulties in creating an atmosphere that might encourage a settlement is his immoderate and abrasive attitude towards the strike over the last week or two?

Mr. Howell: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says. I believe that the public should be given every possible protection against the hardship that has been inflicted on them. Substantial investment has gone into the railway industry, the Government have made clear their commitment in principle to the electrification programme and the East Coast mainline project is with the Department now.

We have always said, and this has received widespread support, that approval of the programme should be linked to progress on productivity and the business performance of the railways. If the hon. Gentleman can point me to where real progress on productivity is taking place I will say that such things should certainly be closely linked to investment, but at the moment no one can argue that we are making progress on productivity.

Mr. John Major (Huntingdonshire): Will my right hon. Friend continue to acknowledge the courage and responsibility of the railwaymen who turned up for work this morning? Does not their action suggest that they believe that the NUR is in the wrong in this dispute? Is it not a tragedy the Mr. Weighell has lost control of his executive?

Mr. Howell: It is my view that the union executive under its present control, wherever that may lie, has taken a tragic turn which is not in the best interests of the industry or those working in it.

Mr. Alexander W. Lyon (York): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the only money that British Rail gets from the Government is the public service obligation, and that that is largely designed to keep open uneconomic lines, most of which are in constituencies represented by Conservative Members? If the Government force British Rail into an economic position in which it has to close lines, the affected lines will be in the constituencies of Conservative Members and not in those represented by Labour Members.

Mr. Howell: The hon. Gentleman used the word "only" when referring to the public service obligation, but it is a very substantial sum—well over £2 million a day. That is a substantial amount and it has been rising to record levels. More taxpayers' money is going into British Rail today than at any time in its history. In addition, the Government provide substantial borrowing facilities and set an investment ceiling, which is higher than it was under the Labour Government. Resources for investment also have to be found within that ceiling. Unfortunately, many have been siphoned off by pointless disputes and soaring daily costs. Those costs need to be controlled, and improvements in working practices would do that.

Mr. Kenneth Lewis (Rutland and Stamford): Is my hon. Friend aware that inside every male member of the

[Mr. Kenneth Lewis]

British public there is a small boy who wants to be a train driver trying to get out? There is no strike in recent years in which there would have been more volunteers, if volunteers were possible.

Mr. Howell: My hon. Friend touches the deep truth that the nation values and regards as precious its railway system. None of us likes to see the system get into the state into which it is being led. I think that that applies on both sides of the House and among those who work in the vast part of the railway industry. Unfortunately, there are apparently others with other views who are leading the industry on a very dangerous course.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): At a time when there are about four million on the dole, largely as a result of the Government's policies, what is morally wrong with railwaymen fighting to save jobs instead of throwing more people on the scrap heap? At a time when the Government are prepared to pay 21 per cent. to judges and 18 per cent. to top civil servants, what is morally wrong with railwaymen fighting to get only half such percentages? Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that 18 months ago he stood at that Dispatch Box and said that he would take on the miners? Four days later he got blown off course.

I suggest to the railwaymen, and I hope that they take careful note of this, that if they keep up the pressure on the Minister they will have more than a good chance of blowing him away. They are fighting for two just causes. Before the election the right hon. Gentleman was one of those who argued for free collective bargaining. That is what railwaymen are fighting for.

Mr. Howell: At a time when there is a high level of unemployment and when many people would like a good and secure job, it is all the more regrettable that, in the light of the issues that have been discussed in the House in the past week, those who control the executive of the NUR should decide that the union should strike. That is regrettable when there are many who need and would like a good and secure job.

As for the rest of the hon. Member's remarks, if one can call them remarks, they will do no service to the railway industry or to bringing peace. If the hon. Gentleman wants to end the dispute he should bring his influence to bear on the railway unions to stop the disastrous course on which they are leading the industry.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I propose to call one more Conservative Back Bencher, because I shall be calling another Opposition Front Bench spokesman.

Mr. John Lee (Nelson and Colne): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is monstrous that in a free society in

this day and age the NUR should call its members out on strike without giving them the individual opportunity of voting in a secret ballot on whether they want to strike? Will he draw to the attention of the NUR executive the fact that many employees in the private sector, including my constituents in the textile industry, have settled for increases of around 5 per cent., despite substantial job losses, redundancies and short-time working, and even though there have been substantial productivity increases?

Mr. Howell: I hope that the NUR conference at Plymouth will be an opportunity for a close consultation and a calmer discussion of the issues involved and the wisdom or otherwise—I believe it to be wholly otherwise—of going on strike. That would be a very good idea.

Mr. Robert Hughes (Aberdeen, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman reflect on his statement and cease to take advice from the hotheads in the Government? Will he for once give encouragement to the railway unions, which have delivered massively on productivity over the past few years? How can the right hon. Gentleman talk about industrial practices of 1919 when he knows that in the past two years alone 14,000 jobs have been negotiated away? How can he talk about his delivery of investment when he knows that in 1980-81 investment was down by £46 million and last year it was down by £21 million? Will he not for once realise that as Secretary of State his job is to give encouragement to the industry and the rail unions and to realise that the first all-out strike of the railways for over 50 years must show that there are very deep feelings within the industry? The right hon. Gentleman ought to bring into the arena a spirit of conciliation instead of merely rabbiting on as he does. He is responsible for the damage to the railway industry and well he knows it.

Mr. Howell: The best encouragement for the industry, and it ought to come from the Opposition as well as from other parties, would be the rapid adoption of modern work practices, applied to the new investment and equipment that is rolling on to our railway lines. New electric coaches and sleeping cars are being built, the £200 million high-speed train scheme has just been completed, there is £150 million for the new electric trains between Bedford and St. Pancras and a vast re-signalling programme. I do not know why the hon. Gentleman dismisses those as being of no significance. He would do better to go to the railwaymen, who are dedicated and sensible people, and say that investment is going on, with the prospect of more if they can cut costs and adopt the new work practices. That will generate more money which can be invested in the railways. Let us together do that and work on those lines instead of striking against the public and strangling London and the country, which will do no good to the union, the railways or the nation.